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Evolution Of Child Health Policies And The Impact Of The Environment On Development: An Integrative Review

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Abstract:

Background: A Despite the advances in child health policies in Brazil since the 1980s, the influence of the environment and parenting practices on the holistic development of children still requires a critical and indepth analysis. The aim of this study was to analyze the evolution of child health policies in Brazil, focusing on the impact of these policies on the holistic development of children, highlighting the role of the environment and parenting practices in supporting child growth and development.

Materials and Methods: This is an Integrative Review study following the PRISMA protocol. Data collection took place in September 2023, using the BVS (LILACS, MEDLINE) and SciELO databases. The eligibility criteria included original articles published between 2018 and 2023, available for free in Portuguese, English, or Spanish. The search and selection process resulted in 8 publications that formed the theoretical corpus.

Results: The analysis of the results revealed two central thematic categories: "Evolution of Child Health Policies and Historical Milestones" and "Child Development and the Importance of the Environment." The analysis shows that child health policies in Brazil since the 1980s have significantly improved children's holistic development, emphasizing the importance of the environment and parenting practices.

Conclusion: Programs such as "Primeira Infância Melhor" (Better Early Childhood) and the Family Health Strategy were essential. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need for flexible policies to address future crises.

Key Word: Health Policy; Child Development; Child Health; Family Environment; Parenting.

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I. Introduction

Child health policies in Brazil, implemented since the 1980s, are essential for the holistic development of children. Programs such as the National Immunization Program (PNI) and the Family Health Strategy (ESF) focus on disease prevention and the promotion of physical, mental, and environmental health, supporting children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth, while also strengthening healthy parenting practices¹.

However, despite significant advances, challenges persist. Studies indicate that socioeconomic and regional inequalities still impact the effectiveness of these policies, reflected in disparities in child health and development². Additionally, the lack of integration between different sectors that influence the child's environment, such as health, education, and social assistance, compromises the implementation of comprehensive and continuous care³.

The implementation of child health policies in Brazil has shown both positive and negative impacts. For example, programs such as the PNI have achieved high vaccination coverage, significantly reducing the incidence of vaccine-preventable diseases¹. However, the prevalence of enteroparasites in economically disadvantaged regions, such as the Northeast, remains high, affecting children's nutritional status and development⁴.

Moreover, childhood obesity has emerged as a public health issue exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need for more effective policies to promote healthy habits and prevent chronic diseases⁵.

In light of this evidence, a detailed analysis of child health policies in Brazil since the 1980s is essential. This investigation aimed to identify strengths and gaps, providing a foundation for more effective strategies. It is crucial to evaluate how these policies influence the environment and parenting practices, and how they can be optimized to promote the holistic development of children in diverse contexts, considering the significant impact of these factors on child growth⁶.

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The central research question of this study is: How have child health policies implemented in Brazil since the 1980s influenced the holistic development of children, considering the role of the environment and parenting practices? This question arises from the need to assess the effectiveness of these policies in promoting healthy and sustainable child development, especially in a country characterized by vast socioeconomic and regional disparities^{1,2}.

This study is relevant not only to the field of public health but also to the formulation of integrated public policies that promote the holistic development of children. By emphasizing the role of the environment and parenting practices, it aims to enhance strategies that strengthen support for families and communities, promoting equitable and healthy child growth. Additionally, the results may inform future research and interventions, expanding the understanding of the social determinants of child health in Brazil^{3,6}.

Thus, the objective was to analyze the evolution of child health policies in Brazil, focusing on the impact of these policies on the holistic development of children, highlighting the role of the environment and parenting practices in supporting child growth and development.

II. Material And Methods

This is an Integrative Review (IR) study of the literature, conducted following the recommendations of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol⁷. The development of this study followed distinct stages⁸, which include: 1. Identification of the topic (formulation of the research question); 2. Establishment of study eligibility criteria; 3. Systematic search in various information sources; 4. Data collection; 5. Data analysis; 6. Discussion; 7. Presentation of the review/synthesis of knowledge.

The guiding research question was formulated according to the PCC (Population, Concept, and Context) strategy, based on the recommendations of the Joanna Briggs Institute⁹. Considering these elements, the following structure was outlined: P: children in Brazil; C: Child health policies and their impact on the holistic development of children; and C: The environment and parenting practices in Brazil. From this perspective, the following research question was formulated: How have child health policies implemented in Brazil since the 1980s influenced the holistic development of children, considering the role of the environment and parenting practices?

The search and selection of publications on the topic were conducted in September 2023. For the mapping of production, the Virtual Health Library (BVS) was used, accessing the following databases: Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS), Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO).

In the selection of articles, standardized controlled terms from the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS) and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) in Portuguese, English, and Spanish were used, combined with the Boolean operators 'AND' and 'OR'. The search was conducted using the following descriptors: Child Development, Growth and Development, Childcare, Childcare, Health Technology, Educational Technology, Biomedical Technology, Health Technology Assessment, Biomedical Technology Assessment, Vaccination, Primary Health Care, and Basic Health Care.

The search strategy adopted followed the recommendations of the "Protocol for developing a search strategy BU/UFSC" of the Federal University of Santa Catarina's University Library 10. The terms used were: (Child Development) OR (Growth and Development) OR (Childcare) OR (Childcare) AND (Health Technology) OR (Educational Technology) OR (Biomedical Technology) OR (Health Technology Assessment) OR (Biomedical Technology Assessment) OR (Vaccination) OR (Primary Health Care) OR (Basic Health Care), combined according to Boolean operators to ensure the precision and scope of the search.

The inclusion criteria for the research were: original articles published between 2018 and 2023, available for free in Portuguese, English, or Spanish, and addressing the formulated research question. Review studies, duplicates, theses, dissertations, books, book chapters, conference abstracts, and editorials, as well as publications not directly related to the investigated theme, were excluded.

For data collection from the selected articles, an instrument developed by the author was used to characterize each production, covering: code (Code), title, journal, year, authors, design, scientific field, research setting, and main results. The data were organized in a Microsoft Excel 2010 database. In the search process, the PRISMA 2020 protocol recommendations were followed⁷. Figure 1 presents a flowchart illustrating the search and selection process of the studies.

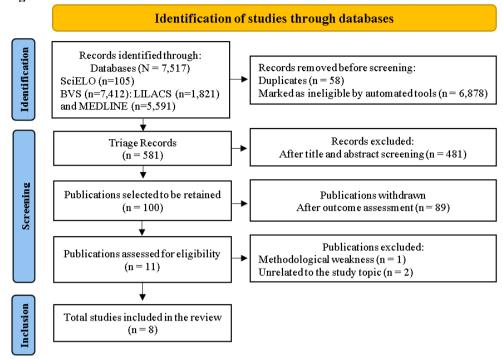


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020: Flowchart of database searches and selection of scientific studies.

Initially, 7,517 records were identified across various databases such as SciELO and BVS: (LILACS and MEDLINE). Of these, 58 duplicates were removed, along with 6,878 records excluded as ineligible by automated tools. After screening 581 records and reading titles and abstracts, 481 were excluded, leaving 100 publications. These underwent a more detailed evaluation of results, where 89 were excluded, leaving 11 eligible publications. Of these, 1 was excluded due to methodological weaknesses, and 2 due to lack of relevance to the study topic. In the end, 8 studies were included in the systematic review, demonstrating a rigorous and thorough process of selection and inclusion of relevant data for the research in question.

The eight remaining studies were fully analyzed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme – CASP 2018 instrument¹¹, chosen for its objectivity and clarity in evaluating scientific quality. After this analysis, all eight publications were retained, as they met all items on the CASP checklist, forming the theoretical corpus of this research.

Subsequently, a critical reading and discussion of the selected articles were carried out, during which the collected data were organized into two central thematic categories relevant to the scope of this study ¹².

Regarding ethical aspects, the guidelines established for review research were followed, respecting the integrity and originality of the analyzed studies. Ethical committee approval was not required, as the research was based exclusively on published literature. All sources were cited and referenced correctly, ensuring the transparency and credibility of the study.

III. Result

The analysis of the journals used reveals a predominance of articles published in the journal "Saúde em Debate," with four of the eight studies being disseminated in this publication. This indicates the relevance of this journal in the field of public health and its importance as a platform for research dissemination on child health policies in Brazil. Other notable journals include "Online braz. j. nurs.," "Rev. Fun Care Online," "Texto & Contexto - Enfermagem," and "Proc Natl Acad Sci USA," each contributing one study, demonstrating the interdisciplinarity and scope of the topics addressed.

As for the year of publication, Table 1 shows a concentration of more recent studies, with most articles published between 2018 and 2022. The year 2022 stands out with five publications, reflecting an increased academic interest in analyzing child health policies and their implications for the holistic development of children. This recent period coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have driven the production of studies investigating the pandemic's impact on parenting practices and child development.

The study designs vary significantly, encompassing qualitative, quantitative, descriptive, and associative approaches. Qualitative studies are important for understanding the subjective perceptions and experiences of families and healthcare professionals 13,14. On the other hand, quantitative and associative studies provide empirical data that allow for correlations to be established and a better understanding of the factors

influencing child development¹⁵. This methodological diversity is essential for obtaining a comprehensive and multifaceted view of child health policies.

Table 1: Description of the selected articles according to title, journal/year of publication, authors, and study design.

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Code	Title	Journal/Year	Authors	Design			
A1	Early childhood health promotion strategies:	Saúde em Debate	Moura, C. S.; et al.	Qualitative			
	weaving local networks	(2022)		study			
A2	Child care in SUS: child care from the perspective	Saúde em Debate	Albernaz, A. L. G.; Systematic				
	of comprehensive health care	(2022)	Couto, M. C. V.	review			
A3	Maternal knowledge about child care during the	Online braz. j. nurs	Cardoso, M. C. S. L.; Qualitat				
	Covid-19 pandemic: a qualitative approach	(2022)	et al.	study			
A4	Contributions of Better Early Childhood to child	Rev. Fun Care	Santos, G. S.; et al.	Qualitative			
	growth and development from families' perspective	Online (2019)		study			
A5	The nurse's practice in child care consultation in the	Texto & Contexto -	Vieira, D. S.; et al.	Cross-sectional			
	family health strategy	Enfermagem (2018)		study			
A6	Parental practices and knowledge: an associative	Saúde em Debate	Dall'Alba, S. C.; et	Associative			
	study on infant motor acquisitions	(2022)	al.	quantitative			
				study			
A7	Early childhood deprivation is associated with	Proc Natl Acad Sci	Mackes, N. K.; et al.	Longitudinal			
	alterations in adult brain structure despite	U S A (2020)		study			
	subsequent environmental enrichment			study			
A8	Psychology-based reflections on the effects of the	Estudos de	Linhares, M. B. M.;	Systematic			
	COVID-19 pandemic on child development	Psicologia (2020)	Enumo, S. R. F.	review			

The analysis of the scientific field of the studies reveals a predominance of Public Health and Nursing areas, reflecting the interdisciplinarity necessary to address the topic of child health policies and their impact on children's development. Studies such as those by Moura et al.¹³ and Albernaz and Couto¹⁶ are examples of Public Health research, emphasizing health promotion and comprehensive child care. Meanwhile, studies by Cardoso et al.¹⁴ and Santos et al.¹⁷ represent the field of Nursing, highlighting the role of healthcare professionals in childcare and parenting practices.

Table 2 - Description of the selected articles according to the scientific field, research setting, and main findings.

Code	Scientific field	Research setting	Main findings	
A1	Public Health	National	The implementation of child health policies in Brazil has strengthened the integral development of children through the creation of healthy environments and positive parenting practices	
A2	Public Health	National	Child health policies have promoted comprehensive care, positively influencing child development and reinforcing the importance of parents' role	
A3	Nursing	National	Child health policies in Brazil have been challenged by the pandemic, but adapted parenting practices have played a crucial role in children's integral development	
A4	Nursing	National	Child health policies have promoted healthy development through family involvement and appropriate parenting practices	
A5	Nursing	National	Child health policies implemented since the 1980s have improved children's integral development through education and support for parenting practices	
A6	Public Health	National	Child health policies have positively influenced children's motor development, highlighting the importance of environment and parenting practices	
A7	Neuroscience	International	Research shows that early childhood deprivation is associated with alterations in adult brain structure, even with subsequent environmental enrichment. Child health policies in Brazil can mitigate these effects through early interventions and appropriate parenting practices	
A8	Psychology	National	Child health policies in Brazil have been adapted to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic, highlighting the crucial role of the family environment and parenting practices in children's development	

The research setting is predominantly national, with most studies focusing on the Brazilian context. This is significant as it allows for a specific analysis of how child health policies implemented in Brazil since the 1980s have influenced the holistic development of children in the country. Studies such as those by Vieira et al. 18 and Dall'Alba et al. 15 provide insights into the application of these policies in specific programs, such as the Family Health Strategy, and their implications for parenting practices and the child's developmental environment.

IV. Discussion

The analysis of this study's results revealed two central thematic categories. The first, "Evolution of Child Health Policies and Historical Milestones," addresses the trajectory of public policies for child health in Brazil, highlighting key historical milestones and relevant legislation. The second, "Child Development and the Importance of the Environment," explores the interdependence between physical growth and cognitive, motor, and psychosocial development, emphasizing the crucial role of the environment and parenting practices.

Evolution of Child Health Policies and Historical Milestones

The recent advancement of scientific knowledge, driven by technology and demographic changes, has required a revision of the care model for early childhood, thus creating a new landscape in the field of child health¹³.

In the 1980s, nations prioritized child well-being, focusing on promoting conditions for the protection and development of children and reducing child mortality. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, promoted by UNICEF and ratified by the UN General Assembly, came into effect in 1990, influencing the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection, and Development of Children, supported by 159 countries, including Brazil¹⁶.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Brazil made social progress during its redemocratization. The 1988 Federal Constitution and the Organic Laws No. 8,080 and No. 8,142 of 1990 formalized the Unified Health System (SUS). During this period, the country participated in international investigations in defense of children, culminating in the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) in 1990. However, the Comprehensive Child Health Care Program (Paisc) of 1984 focused on biological issues, neglecting the subjective aspects of child development. It was only in 2004 that the Ministry of Health took a clear stance on child development surveillance¹⁶.

Monitoring child growth and development (GD) is the conceptual pillar of comprehensive care, capturing the idea of an active, continuous, and sound process of physical growth, intrinsically linked to cognitive evolution and subjective, mental, and emotional aspects. These developmental patterns are concretely represented by milestones, established through systematic comparisons and assessments, considering each child's individual characteristics¹⁶.

Monitoring child development during the early years of life plays a crucial role in promoting health, preventing issues, and identifying possible delays in neuropsychomotor development. One of the approaches used to enhance neurodevelopment is Parental Intervention (PI). Parenting practices refer to the set of actions and interactions of parents and caregivers in the care and socialization of their children ¹⁴.

Neuroscience provides solid evidence that investing time, affection, and fostering an environment conducive to the cognitive and social growth and development of children can play a crucial role in reversing unfavorable situations. Stimulation and monitoring during the early years of life are particularly significant, as they can help break cycles of poverty and vulnerability, offering children a solid foundation for healthy development and future opportunities¹³.

Child Development and the Importance of the Environment

A child is a human being at the beginning of their development, a critical phase in which most of their abilities and potential are being acquired. For this maturation process to occur in a healthy and natural way, it is essential to create appropriate conditions. This highlights the importance of a conducive environment that is adapted to the child's physical and emotional needs, providing essential elements such as safety, affection, shelter, and proper nutrition. The absence of such an environment can negatively impact the child's emotional development, delaying it¹⁷.

Furthermore, child growth is a constantly evolving process and plays a crucial role in evaluating the child's health. Therefore, fundamental parameters such as weight, height, head circumference, and body mass index (BMI) must be rigorously monitored in the care provided to the child, as these indicators play a vital role in identifying potential risks for child mortality ¹⁸.

Growth and development are intrinsically related, but growth is a more measurable dimension, manifesting through an increase in body size, assessed using anthropometric measurements. By tracking growth, professionals have the opportunity to identify various conditions, such as the child's general health, nutrition, hygiene, and the environment in which they live. This allows for the detection of possible problems or environmental factors that may be affecting the child's development¹⁷.

Child development is a gradual and progressive process, characterized by organized changes that occur throughout a child's life. These changes happen continuously, with periods of stability that succeed and overlap. This developmental process is self-organized and adapts to individual, environmental constraints and the tasks a child faces, shaping itself according to these factors¹⁵.

Child development can be described as a comprehensive and multidimensional process that encompasses physical growth, motor, cognitive, and psychosocial development during the early years of life. When a child is exposed to risk factors, whether biological or environmental in nature, they are at risk of experiencing developmental delays¹⁴.

Human development begins at conception and continues throughout life, involving the acquisition of skills in various areas, including physical, psychological, and cognitive aspects, among others. This process is significantly influenced by the environment in which the child lives, which can either limit or stimulate their abilities. Development during childhood is particularly crucial, and it is essential that professionals and families understand the specific characteristics and needs of children at this stage to provide appropriate support¹⁷.

Child development in the early years is strongly influenced by bonding and brain stimulation, shaped by social, cognitive, and emotional factors. Instabilities in these influences increase the risk of developmental delays. Reaching full potential involves acquiring essential skills for academic, social, economic, and emotional success. The family, especially the mother, plays a crucial role in providing stimulation and support during this process¹⁴.

During early childhood, a child's experiences can lead to permanent brain changes. A stimulating environment can alter brain anatomy in less than three weeks, while severe deprivation of stimuli is associated with adverse brain effects in adulthood, even if the initial exposure is followed by more enriching environments later on ¹⁹.

In the early years of life, children demonstrate remarkable brain plasticity, allowing the brain to acquire new skills in various dimensions, such as cognitive, motor, and psychosocial. This interdependence between motor, cognitive, and social development highlights the mutual influence of these aspects, emphasizing the importance of care and parenting practices for the holistic development of the child¹⁵.

Child monitoring often neglects the mother's perception of her child's development, focusing mainly on breastfeeding and hygiene, to the detriment of other crucial aspects of child development. It is imperative to adopt a more comprehensive approach that considers maternal perspectives and addresses the child's growth and developmental needs holistically¹⁸.

Health promotion should indeed begin during pregnancy and continue throughout early childhood. This is because the fundamental foundations of child development are established in the early years of life and depend on the physical, emotional, and symbolic relationships formed between the baby and their mother (or caregiver). These relationships play a crucial role in integrating the human being into culture and constructing their subjectivity. Therefore, investing in the quality of these relationships from the earliest moments of life is of utmost importance for the child's long-term health and well-being¹³.

The close emotional bond between mother and child, expressed through smiles and play, along with support for breastfeeding and dedication to hygiene care, has a significant positive impact during the first year of a child's life. These affectionate interactions and care practices are a crucial initial pathway for the child's healthy development¹⁵. These emotional interactions ensure that the child has a favorable environment for holistic development, protecting them from exposure to "toxic stress."

Children exposed to stressful environments often exhibit elevated levels of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress regulation, compared to those in less stressful environments. Changes in cortisol levels affect the immune and nervous systems, influencing aspects such as emotion, memory, and learning. The term "toxic stress" refers to intense and prolonged exposure to adversity, with potentially harmful consequences for child development and health, increasing hyperactivity in the neural circuits responsible for the fear response, resulting in aggressive behaviors as self-defense^{19,20}.

The analyzed studies highlight the evolution of early childhood care, emphasizing the impact of public policies and legal frameworks, such as the 1988 Constitution and the 1990 Statute of the Child and Adolescent, on child protection and development. They stress the importance of monitoring growth and development, the essential role of parenting practices and early interventions, and the need for a safe and stimulating environment for healthy neurodevelopment.

V. Conclusion

The analysis of studies on child health policies in Brazil since the 1980s reveals significant progress in the comprehensive development of children, highlighting the crucial role of environment and parenting practices. The implementation of these policies has promoted more comprehensive and efficient care, reflected in improvements in children's motor, cognitive, and emotional development. Programs such as "Primeira Infância Melhor" and the "Family Health Strategy" have been essential in providing support and education to parents and caregivers.

Studies indicate that child health policies in Brazil have been effective in creating local health promotion networks, enhancing maternal knowledge about childcare, and adapting to contemporary challenges, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in the healthcare system,

underscoring the need for flexible and robust policies to address unexpected crises. Adapted parenting practices demonstrated the resilience of families and the importance of ongoing support from public policies.

Although the reviewed studies provide a comprehensive view of child health policies in Brazil, there are important limitations to consider. The integrative review focused mainly on qualitative and descriptive approaches, which limits the ability to establish strong causal relationships. To overcome these limitations, it is recommended that new research be conducted using longitudinal and experimental designs to more accurately investigate the causal factors between health policies and outcomes in child development.

In light of this, it is recommended to strengthen and expand child health policies, with an emphasis on creating healthy environments and providing continuous support for parenting practices. It is crucial to ensure that these policies are adaptable to future crises, such as pandemics, and consider Brazil's regional and socioeconomic diversity. New research should explore specific strategies for different contexts and continuously monitor the effectiveness of implemented policies. Investing in parental education and family support is essential for the comprehensive development of children.

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